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# **THE RELUCTANT PEACEMAKER**

**RWANDA APRIL 1994**

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## **THE RELUCTANT PEACEMAKER**

### **RWANDA APRIL 1994**

*"The Contracting Parties confirm that genocide, whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake **to prevent** and to punish".*

UN Genocide Convention - Article 1 1948<sup>1</sup>

*"...in 1994, Rwanda experienced the most intensive slaughter in this blood-filled century...the international community...must bear its share of responsibility for this tragedy..."*

President Clinton, Kigali, March 1998<sup>2</sup>

### **INTRODUCTION**

No more genocide - the nations of the world reacted to the shock of the systematic mass extermination of European Jews and other ethnic groups during World War II by agreeing to act pre-emptively against future threats of genocide. The '90s began with President Bush declaring a "new world order where brutality will go un-rewarded and aggression will meet collective resistance."<sup>3</sup> Yet, in 1998, President Clinton apologized to the Rwandan people for failure to act against the most efficient genocide of the century. Why, in 1994, did the United States of America, as the world's leader in human rights, decide not to act while up to a million Rwandans were murdered?

The purpose of the paper is to examine the personal, organizational and interagency issues that led to the decision not to intervene militarily in Rwanda during the 90 days of the genocide. The analysis will show that a lack of executive level (political) leadership allowed personal and organizational factors within the bureaucracy to determine national policy.

Initially, this paper discusses the previous experiences of the principals, the organizations and possible pre-conceptions. Secondly, the paper analyzes how they viewed the Rwandan crisis and formed their positions. It then addresses the interactions

that resulted in the final decision. Finally, comment is made on the enduring effects of that decision on US policy making. The paper is limited to US decisions and is not concerned with the actions of international players except where there is a direct effect on US decisions. While covering much of the same material as the references, this paper is not concerned with apportioning blame, and deliberately does not assess the rights or wrongs of the decisions made during the genocide in Rwanda.

### **PROLOGUE – SOMALIA TO RWANDA**

*“The world can...fulfill the long-held promise of a new world order, where brutality will go unrewarded and aggression will meet collective resistance. Yes, the United States bears a major share of the leadership in this effort...has both the moral standing and the means to back it up”*  
President George Bush, Jan 1991<sup>4</sup>

President Bush’s public vision was backed by bureaucratic determination. In March 1991, Assistant Secretary of State, John Bolton specified two new objectives being pursued by his department – ‘to strengthen the UN’s efforts to promote international peace and security by strengthening its peacekeeping functions...’ and ‘to re-establish America’s image as a credible, reliable participant in international organizations’.<sup>5</sup> The Department of Defense, perhaps understandably, was much more cautious. Until the early 1990s, the US had never contributed ground troops to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions – previous support had comprised extensive observer, logistic and communications support and financing. The Vietnam experience resulted in a list of guiding principles for determining whether US troops should be deployed abroad. The Weinberger – Powell Doctrine emphasized criteria such as clear mission statements, relevance to US interests and clear exit strategies – criteria that did not fit the relatively undefined nature of peacekeeping operations under the control of the United Nations.

Enter the new Clinton Administration in January 1993. In general, the new appointees held views more in line with the career officials in the State Department rather than the Pentagon. Incoming Secretary of State Warren Christopher indicated that peacekeeping would be an important foreign policy tool and commenced the planning for the US military involvement in the ‘nation-building’ phase of the Somalia operation. In relation to Somalia, the new US Ambassador to the United Nations, Madeleine Albright, stated, “we will embark on an unprecedented enterprise aimed at nothing less than the restoration of an entire country as a proud functioning and viable member of the community of nations”.<sup>6</sup> Prior to the 1992 election, the new Secretary for Defense, Les Aspin had questioned the validity of the Weinberger – Powell Doctrine in the post-Cold War period. Aspin was also more aligned with State Department views on peacekeeping. As early as December 1992, the Pentagon had recognized the inevitability of change with a statement by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Powell – “I believe peacekeeping and humanitarian operations are a given. Likewise our forward presence is a given – to signal commitment to our allies and give second thoughts to any disturber of the peace”.<sup>7</sup>

The apparent consensus between the Clinton Administration, State and Defense on pursuing multi-lateral foreign policies and aggressive peacekeeping was severely shaken by the deaths of 18 US military personnel in Somalia on 3 October 1993. By November 1993, State and Defense had agreed on a draft Presidential Directive, PDD-25, that set out the policy for future peacekeeping missions. Not surprisingly, PDD-25 contained much of the tone and some of the criteria of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine.

On 11 January 1994, the Rwandan issue first appeared on the horizon with a facsimile from the UN force commander in Rwanda containing the detailed plans and

lists for assassinating UN peacekeepers, Rwanda politicians and Tutsis. President Clinton had suffered a public relations blow from the deaths in Somalia and the subsequent hasty withdrawal. He remained uncomfortable dealing with the military with which he had little empathy. The Administration's declared policies still acknowledged active peacekeeping and support for UN operations, however, both State and Defense officials were aware that a significantly new and more cautious policy had been prepared and largely accepted – but not formally approved (PDD-25). The Clinton Administration had lost its initial enthusiasm for peacekeeping. Christopher, Albright and Aspin were reluctant to address new peacekeeping issues until the new presidential policy had been formally adopted. The scene was set for the Rwandan genocide and the American response to it.

### **DECISIONS IN CRISIS – 90 DAYS OF GENOCIDE**

*"All over the world, there were people like me sitting in offices...who did not fully appreciate the depth and the speed with which you were being engulfed by this unimaginable horror".*

President Clinton, March 1998<sup>8</sup>

#### **90 Days of Terror**

On 6 April 1994, the aircraft carrying the Rwandan President, Juvenal Habyarimana, and the Burundian President, Cyprien Ntaryimira, was shot down killing all on board. Government troops and Hutu militia commenced the systematic murder of the opposition Prime Minister, the president of the constitutional court, priests, Tutsi officials and sympathizers, followed by a general Hutu uprising against the Tutsi population at the rate of some 10,000 deaths per day. On the second day, 10 captured Belgian peacekeepers were murdered prompting a Belgian request to the United Nations to either dramatically increase the UNAMIR's mandate or immediately withdraw. On 21 April, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) voted to withdraw most UN forces from

Rwanda – by which time some 250,000 Tutsi were dead. By 16 May, public pressure resulting from media, human rights organizations and diplomatic reporting of the slaughter resulted in a UN resolution to provide a military force of 5,500 troops. The UN force was poorly supported and was still not effectively deployed over two months later. France announced that it would unilaterally intervene and received UNSC approval on 22 June, setting up a humanitarian zone in southwest Rwanda in early July. Tutsi forces captured the Rwandan capital of Kigali on 4 July setting up a new Government a fortnight later. The violence had ended when US troops arrived in August to support the humanitarian assistance operation in the Central Africa region - they departed in October.

### **The Contentious Decisions**

There was no single presidential decision that stated that the US would not intervene to stop the genocide in Rwanda. The inaction was the result of a series of individual decisions developed within the Administration that, taken collectively, had the effect of setting national policy. The contributory decisions that will be addressed in this paper are those that were contained in a series of declassified US government documents published in August 2001.<sup>9</sup> The documents show that:

- While US ground forces were not directly involved, the US Administration lobbied for total withdrawal of other UN forces in Rwanda in April 1994;
- US officials did not publicly acknowledge ‘genocide’ in Rwanda until 10 June.
- The United States acted to dissuade other countries from intervening in Rwanda.

### **The Political Environment and External Influences**

Before addressing the actions and beliefs of the key players and organizations within the Administration, it would be fruitful to address the broader environment that

influenced their decisions at the time. As in all political decision-making, the primary influences were the interlinked views of the media, Congress and public opinion. To a lesser extent, the decision makers were influenced by international opinion, the United Nations and human rights organizations.

Considering the magnitude of the crisis, the Rwandan genocide was somewhat remarkable for the absence of media pressure on the government for action of any kind. While the daily savagery was accurately covered, it was reported as a ‘typical’ African civil war and tribal dispute. Africa had never been at the forefront of US interests and the media’s knowledge of Africa and its politics was poor. *Time* magazine reported on “tribal carnage” and “pure tribal enmity”.<sup>10</sup> The *New York Post* referred to “Africa’s heart of darkness”.<sup>11</sup> There was certainly no questioning of the Clinton Administration’s inaction on Rwanda. The *New York Times* wrote, “to enter this conflict without a defined mission or a plausible military plan risks a repetition of the debacle in Somalia”.<sup>12</sup> During the 90 days of genocide, the media exerted no influence on the decision-makers within the Administration, except perhaps to imply support for whatever action they were contemplating.

Republican Senate Minority Leader, Bob Dole, summed up Congress’ view of the Rwandan crisis in a press statement on 10 April – “I don’t think that we have any national interest there”.<sup>13</sup> By and large, the American public maintained the traditional disinterest in foreign affairs issues; consequently, there was no pressure on Congress to take a position, let alone to act. The African sub-committees and the Congressional Black Caucus raised concerns but avoided arguing for a military commitment in the light of the public backlash from the Mogadishu deaths six months earlier. Once again, the

only pressure that policy makers felt was the need to convince Congress that the Clinton Administration was much more cautious about committing ground troops and resources overseas than they had been with Somalia.

In summary, there were no domestic political actors pressing for action in Rwanda that would compel the policy advisers in the National Security Council, State and Defense to review their policies.

### **The National Security Council (NSC)**

The NSC's role is to support the President. In relation to the growing crisis in Rwanda, that meant primarily avoiding engagement in a conflict that did not directly affect the United States or its direct interests, and convincing Congress that the Administration had a responsible and cautious approach to peacekeeping operations. As a by-product of these goals the NSC sought to ensure that the Clinton Administration could not be accused of standing aside during the genocide while others had acted. These goals led to the three contentious decisions listed earlier.

Clinton's National Security Advisor was Anthony Lake. As the senior White House official responsible for foreign policy, Lake should have been leading the development of policies on Rwanda. In fact, in his own words, Lake was "busy with Bosnia and Haiti",<sup>14</sup> and left the Rwandan issue, not to his deputy, Sandy Berger, rather to the Senior Director for Peacekeeping, Richard Clarke. Lake did not take control of policy until after the public outcry over the subsequent humanitarian crisis caused by the Rwandan refugees in Goma in late July 1994.

Donald Steinberg was Senior Director of the African directorate at the NSC and as such, should have been the main driver of policy development for Rwanda. While

Steinberg had both the detailed knowledge of Africa and the desire to assist the Rwandans, his effectiveness was limited. Firstly, taking up the position in February 1994, he was inexperienced in working the system – the bureaucratic in-fighting necessary to have your views hold sway. Consequently, he constantly lost out to the views of Richard Clarke. Steinberg's other possible action channel was through the African desk at the Department of State. However, as with the NSC, the African specialists at State had the least influence of all the players.

Richard Clarke was primarily concerned with developing a formal peacekeeping doctrine subsequently known as PDD-25. While this presidential decision directive set out considerations for the employment of US forces for peacekeeping missions, the policy effect was to limit future US involvement, minimize the risk to US deployed forces and limit political fallout by opposing UN activities that the US would not directly support with its own forces. PDD-25 was approved on 3 May 1994 and became the basis for Clarke's policy recommendations on Rwanda. Richard Clarke was a highly respected, career civil servant who knew how to work the interagency system. With Lake's detachment from the Rwandan crisis, Clarke spoke with the full authority of the NSC and had access to the highest levels in the Administration.

### **Department of State**

In regard to Rwanda, the leadership within State mirrored the lack of interest within the NSC. George Moose, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs should have been directing policy development during the crisis. However, Moose was primarily concerned with the politically important South African election and delegated responsibility for Rwanda to his deputy assistant secretary, Prudence Bushnell. Bushnell

was a relatively junior official representing a low priority foreign affairs directorate. As such, her attempts to influence policy through the interagency process with the major players at the NSC and Defense were ineffectual. One State official interviewed commented that Bushnell could not even count on support from her superior, Moose, who was reluctant to stand out at any time.<sup>15</sup> The one action channel that might have been useful to the African Bureau was the power of the politically charged term, ‘genocide’; however, Secretary of State, Warren Christopher, had expressly forbidden use of ‘the g-word’ until 21 May.<sup>16</sup> Outside the directly involved experts in the African Bureau, the State Department position supported the narrow definition of US interests that encouraged non-intervention.

### **Department of Defense**

Documents relating to the period show little influence by Pentagon officials. The institutional Defense position was a reflection of the views held by the individuals involved in the interagency process on Rwanda. In an interview for *Frontline*, Deputy Assistant Secretary for African Affairs at the Department of Defense, James Woods, noted that regardless of statements by the Secretary and CJS, professional military officers were concerned “that the White House was not strong in military planning and operations” and “that we would get prematurely committed to ill-considered foreign adventures”.<sup>17</sup>

After Somalia, Defense officials were in the envious position of not having to argue a case for action, only to maintain the status quo. In the prevailing political climate, military action was unlikely to be strongly pursued by any of the parties; however, Defense also felt the need to avoid mission creep by opposing softer options

that involved Defense assets. Their ‘action channel’ was to raise problems, costs and unpalatable consequences of actions being proposed by others. A proposal to jam radio ‘hate messages’ was initially opposed on the bases of cost and diversion of scarce aviation assets and, finally, a specious legal opinion that it “would be contrary to US constitutional protection of freedom of the press, freedom of speech”.<sup>18</sup> The 17 May decision to deploy 60 US military vehicles in support of UN forces was rendered ineffective by Pentagon delays over leasing costs and equipment specifications that prevented their use until August. Interestingly, when the White House exhibited leadership and issued orders to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Goma, the Pentagon had effective troops on the ground providing fresh water within three to four days.

### **Decision - Making - The Interagency Process and the Principals**

The State Department chaired daily interagency meetings of mid-level officials to coordinate policy advice – the meetings often held by tele-conference. As discussed, the African Bureau had little influence over its own Department of State position let alone Defense or NSC. In a ‘*Frontline*’ interview Lieutenant Colonel Tony Marley, a military affairs advisor in the African Bureau at State, noted that most tele-conference participants were “approaching these conferences from institutional interest, bureaucratic interest that had nothing to do with Rwanda”.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, in the same interview, Marley stated that the interagency conferences were chaired by the NSC, perhaps a reflection of the obvious influence of Richard Clarke’s views in the decisions reached. The decisions not to have a military involvement in Rwanda, not to recognize the occurrence of genocide and to oppose any other UN mandates that could ultimately lead to US involvement were a direct result of Clarke’s development of PDD-25 and his ability to influence the highest

levels of the Administration. Journalist, Samantha Power, asserts that Clarke, without reference to either Steinberg or Lake, influenced Warren Christopher to send to the United Nations a strong demand for full withdrawal from Rwanda.<sup>20</sup> If the NSC and departmental officials developed policy advice based on institutional biases, what was the involvement of the political leadership in making decisions?

At no stage did President Clinton meet with his senior advisors on Rwanda to discuss involvement or intervention. There was not a single meeting of the principals. The only guiding statement publicly issued by the White House was a press release naming and calling on four Rwandan military leaders to “end the violence”. Internally, Warren Christopher issued the only official direction when he initially directed his staff not to use or act on the basis of the term ‘genocide’. Within the National Security Council, State and Defense Departments, senior officials remained aloof from the Rwandan crisis and policy development, thereby leaving decisions to middle level bureaucrats. It should not be a surprise that these officials recommended policies on the basis of the institutional views of their organizations, however, the fact these institutional views became final decisions reflects a lack of leadership in the interagency process.

## EPILOGUE

*“a new order of international affairs is not just around the corner...there should be a willingness to delay the start of a mission until the parties accept...a negotiated settlement”*

Ambassador Albright, Jan 1995<sup>21</sup>

The Presidential Decision Directive on Peacekeeping was issued on 3 May 1994 – a month into the Rwandan crisis and after the reality of genocide was known. If the realization of the horror of the 90 days of slaughter in Rwanda altered the views of the Clinton Administration towards PDD-25, it was not evident in January 1995 when

Ambassador Albright addressed the United Nations Security Council. In January 2000, President G.W. Bush stated in relation to possible future Rwandas, “I don’t like genocide but I would not commit our troops”.<sup>22</sup> The United States position on situations like Rwanda has not changed, however, the political leadership has now provided direction within which officials can develop specific policy advice.

### **CONCLUSION**

Whether President Clinton and his cabinet officials were unaware of the genocide, knew but chose to ignore what was happening or in fact manipulated the process to achieve inaction will remain the subject of conjecture. The presidential quotations through out this paper indicate a belief that humanitarian action should have been taken on the basis of broader national interests. However, neither President Clinton nor his cabinet appointees made a clear statement of their position on whether the United States should intervene in Rwanda. The senior bureaucrats who should have actively sought policy direction from the political leadership abrogated their responsibility to middle level officials. Understandably, these officials based their policy recommendations on the only influences imposed on them – the institutional biases of their organizations and the natural desire to minimize risk by maintaining the status quo. Those officials who were expert in African affairs were unable to prevail in the interagency process.

A generous interpretation would be that the Executive was shy of making a difficult decision that did not seem to be important at the time and left it to the bureaucratic process. Regardless, the effect of this lack of strong leadership was that civil service professionals, who were neither elected nor congressionally approved, determined the US national interest and policy response on Rwanda. Never again?

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